

**DOES IT MATTER WHAT CHURCH YOU BELONG TO? . . .
WHY AM I A PRESBYTERIAN AFTER ALL THESE YEARS?
September 13, 2009**

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**Psalm 19
Matthew 16:13-20**

**“On this rock I will build my church.”
Matthew 16: 18 (NRSV)**

I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art,
My only trust and Savior of my heart,
Who pain didst undergo for my poor sake;
I pray thee from our hearts all cares to take.

John Calvin 1509–1564
Geneva Psalter, 1551

*Remind us, as we worship and sing praises
and listen for your word, of all the others—
the millions of others— who gather in your presence today.
Remind us, O God, that you have made us one,
our human family. Be with all those others
in every place and be with us. Speak the word
you have for us: open our hearts and minds to
the mystery of your love: in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

I suppose I became a Presbyterian at several critical moments along the way, beginning with one I didn't have much of a say in: the Sunday morning my parents carried me to church and had me baptized. Another one was years later: the time a Presbyterian minister visited us in our modest apartment in seminary married-student housing, a stately old Hyde Park home that had been converted into seven small apartments. ("Apartment" is a generous description. We had a hot plate, an ancient refrigerator, and no kitchen. Dishes were washed in the bathtub. But that's another story and has nothing to do with why I am a Presbyterian.) We were young, 550 miles from home, pretty much alone, and we had a new baby. Ulysses B. Blakely was the minister's name. He was African American, co-pastor—along with Charles Leber, who was white—of the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, located at 64th and Kimbark. "Buck and Chuck," they were affectionately known as, were ministers in a church unlike any I had ever experienced.

The congregation was integrated, about half black and half white. I had never seen that before. The two pastors were a bold experiment in interracial ministry. I had grown up with and known a few African American children of railroad porters, housekeepers, one city policeman. One of my enduring memories is of Ulysses Blakely sitting in a folding chair in our little apartment, holding in his strong dark hands our four-week-old tiny white baby daughter. As I have pondered the question “Why Am I a Presbyterian?” and the larger question of how any of us becomes who we are, I concluded that that moment was one of the moments when I became a Presbyterian.

I was baptized a Presbyterian, taken to Sunday School and worship, but my denominational loyalties were not deep. I suppose we all wonder if we had been born something else—Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim—whether we would have lived it out and claimed it as our religious preference. I have always thought the answer to that is probably yes.

In the 1960s, it was fashionable in academic and seminary circles to criticize the church as a distortion of and distraction from true Christianity, a pious enclave for like-minded and mostly narrow-minded people. It was First Presbyterian, Chuck and Buck, who caused me to reexamine that presumptuous generalization and finally to reclaim the faith tradition of my childhood as my own. First Presbyterian had black and white people sitting together in the pews on Sunday morning, black and white children in Sunday school and youth groups, and better music than I had ever heard in church. The church was an important part of its changing neighborhood. A few years later, after radical neighborhood transformation in Woodlawn and the increasing violence and drug and gang activity, First Presbyterian hung on and kept reaching out, inviting the notorious Blackstone Rangers to use the church hall for meetings: the pastor ultimately convincing the gang members to deposit their weapons in the church safe, a move the Chicago police didn’t think much of and raided the church and confiscated the weapons, ending an initiative, while risky, that had at least a possibility of hope and redemption. The minister, John Fry, was subpoenaed to appear before a congressional committee on organized crime, and the minister of this church, my predecessor, Elam Davies, flew to Washington to testify on his behalf. How could you not love a church like that? It was a long way from the church of my childhood, and beginning with Buck Blakely holding my new baby and on to the Blackstone Rangers’ guns in the church safe, it was, and remains, one of the reasons I am a Presbyterian still.

It is an interesting time for the church, particularly for the Protestant denominations, the old mainline denominations: United Church of Christ, Methodist, Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian. We have all been losing members for forty years—or more accurately, not replacing old ones. There are 2.1 million members of our denomination, the Presbyterian

Church (U.S.A.) ; forty years ago there were 4 million. The statistics are similar for the other denominations. There are reasons. The Religious Right likes to claim it is because the church has become too liberal, too invested in this world. There is absolutely no data even to suggest that. Declining birth rate is an important reason: Presbyterians stopped reproducing themselves about forty years ago. Demographics is another: Presbyterian churches are located all over the country in county seat towns and old neighborhoods that have undergone radical change. Entire populations have left. First Presbyterian Church had 1,200 members fifty years ago. Today it has 150. In the meantime, the original ethnic identity of the old denominations has totally disappeared. English Episcopalian, Scots Presbyterian, German Lutheran is no longer a factor. In our market culture, people choose churches on the basis of the music, quality of education, convenience, and parking. Robert Schuller, founder of the Crystal Cathedral, one of the first megachurches, once famously said that the one absolute necessity for a growing church is a parking lot: we smile at that around here as we continue to grow with no parking at all.

Megachurches, placed strategically geographically, with new facilities and plenty of high tech, acres of parking and no visible denominational connection, are thriving. Independent churches thrive. Some are saying that it is the post-denominational age: that the era that began with the birth of different kinds of churches in the Reformation 500 years ago is over and we are at the beginning of a new age.

Globally, Christianity is growing dramatically—it is by far the world's largest religion—but the center of gravity is shifting south, and the new center geographically will not be Rome, Canterbury, or Geneva, but somewhere in Africa.

Some historians are saying that we are actually at the beginning of a new reformation, with old ways of being the church slowly dying and new ways struggling to be born. And so how appropriate that 2009 is the 500th birthday of one of the figures most responsible for the first reformation, John Calvin, the father of our particular tradition, Presbyterian-Reformed.

I brushed up on Calvin in my summer reading this year, and it was not always easy—Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is one of the great intellectual achievements in Christian history but not exactly “beach reading.”

John Calvin was born in 1509 in Noyon, France, and from an early age was an exceptional intellect. He attended the University of Paris to study theology, changed his mind and moved to Orleans to study law. He was first and foremost a classical humanist scholar and wanted most to study, write, and teach—to live the life of a scholar. Religious leader and reformer were

not on his agenda. New Renaissance humanism was the intellectual fashion, with its emphasis on recovering classical Greek and Roman texts and literature, its rediscovery of music and the arts, and its emphasis on the individual—individual potential, individual rights. The other influence in Calvin's early life was the new religious thinking coming from Wittenberg, Germany, where Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and scholar, had broken with Rome—actually Rome excommunicated Luther. Calvin and other French intellectuals were interested, intrigued, and Calvin, now back in Paris, was identified with the new thinking. The French monarchy took a very dim view of the whole matter. Scholars—reformers—were arrested, interrogated, imprisoned; a few were executed. John Calvin fled and spent the rest of his life in exile from his native France. He eventually ended up in Geneva, was persuaded to remain, and help lead and organize the new Reformed churches of the city. Geneva was an independent Swiss city-state that had recently decided to become a Protestant city. The Roman Catholic churches all became Reformed churches; the Roman Catholic clergy were offered the opportunity to become Protestant ministers or leave. Some stayed. Some left. Calvin remained in Geneva for twenty-eight years until his death, at the age of fifty-five, in 1564. By force of his intellect and physical stamina, discipline and absolute devotion to God and what he absolutely believed was the will of God, Calvin became the leader of the Geneva church and clergy, its foremost scholar, and in many ways Geneva's most important citizen. Geneva became the center of, with Wittenberg, the huge upheaval we now know as the Reformation. Calvin had opinions on everything and expressed them with vehemence that bordered on fanaticism. His intellectual output was prodigious, almost unbelievable. He preached from the pulpit of the Cathedral of St. Pierre in the center of Geneva several times every week, lectured daily to the city's pastors who gathered to learn from him, wrote commentaries on most of the books of the Bible, wrote essays, letters to kings and emperors, bishops and scholars. He was the moderator of the Consistory, a representative body of ministers and laity he created to govern the affairs of the church. He attended and eventually sat on the city council, helped design the city sewer system and regulations for the city markets, established a charitable agency to assist the thousands of religious refugees flocking to Geneva, maintained a household always full of guests and visiting scholars. He has a reputation for grim, rigid piety. Actually, he enjoyed wine, music, and well-appointed women and lived with a long list of devastating physical ailments characteristic of his age. Historians contend that he literally worked himself to death. By the time he died, every political and religious leader in Europe—emperors, kings, popes—knew of him, had read him, and had an opinion about him.

To try to enter his world, the world of sixteenth-century Europe, or even to get your mind around it, as I tried to do this summer, is a little like Dorothy

getting caught up in a tornado, tossed into the land of Oz, and observing “this isn’t Kansas.”

In the sixteenth century, people died and killed for religious reasons; it was a time when governments persecuted, exiled, and executed citizens for religious reasons; a time when heresy—wrong religious thinking—was a capital offense. We have difficulty with all of that, and the reason is that we are beneficiaries of an idea that is only about 250 years old: namely the separation of church and state. Some of John Calvin’s ideas would ultimately be influential in the concept of religious liberty and the separation of church and state, but at the time, it was simply unimaginable. The operating idea for 1,500 years was that there could be only one religion, one church, and that a person’s religion was what the ruler said it was. Individual choice or preference had nothing to do with it. The ruler, the king, the emperor, the city council in Geneva, decided, and everyone became whatever the authorities chose. If a German prince, for whatever reason, became tired of Rome and sided with Luther, all his subjects became Lutherans overnight. If the king of France decided to remain loyal to the papacy, which he did, too bad for the Protestants—the Huguenots—who were massacred. If the Geneva city council decided to side with the Reformation, the churches became Protestant and the priests became ministers or refugees overnight. And furthermore, everyone agreed that this arrangement was absolutely necessary for the peace and order of society and the security of the state. So heresy became a political crime, a crime against the authority of the state, and therefore the state executed heretics.

Calvin himself was part of this mentality even as he was beginning to think about liberty. When a famous heretic by the name of Servetus, already under death sentence by both German Lutherans and French Catholics, showed up in Geneva, he was arrested, put on trial by the city council for his theology—he didn’t believe in the Trinity—convicted, and burned at the stake. It is not a pretty moment in our history.

And yet it can be said of very few people that they changed human history. John Calvin is one of them. The *New York Times*’ Peter Steinfels says that Calvin “did as much as anyone to shape the modern world: his legacy has been traced to everything from modern marriage and modern science to modern liberal government and modern capitalism.” Max Weber’s classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* traces the emergence of free markets, credit, and high productivity based on hard work—what Weber called “the Protestant Ethic”—directly to the thinking of John Calvin.

Political scientists acknowledge the direct philosophic line from John Calvin on political liberty to the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution.

As I watched the president address Congress on health care Wednesday night, it occurred to me that the whole drama, the rigorous debate in a climate of political freedom by the people's representatives, and, most important of all, the underlying concern for the well-being of the people and the state's role in it—the assumption that we are in this together, that the community is responsible for all of its citizens, particularly its poorest and most vulnerable—that is not socialism but basic Christian morality. It was a great Calvinist moment.

From John Calvin comes the potentially revolutionary idea that authority in the church and the political arena comes not from the top down but from the bottom up, that people have the God-given right to elect leaders in the churches and in their political entities.

From John Calvin comes the Renaissance humanist idea that Christian faith and Christian theology ought to be subject to the same critical scholarship as any other human enterprise, that people should be able to read—all the people—and that it is the state's responsibility to provide for education.

From John Calvin comes the idea that the sovereignty of God means that the truth of God transcends human attempts to express it—in a hierarchy or a church or creed—and that Christians are responsible to seek truth and to express truth in new ways in every age.

From Calvin comes the idea that faith is not obeying religious rules or performing religious acts but is the absolute certainty of God's benevolence toward us in Jesus Christ, dependent on nothing in us or about us but only on the grace of God.

From Calvin comes the idea that religion is authentically expressed not just inside the church but in the marketplace, the halls of government, the city streets, in the way people live in society.

And from John Calvin comes the idea that there are many ways to be the church, not just one; although he vigorously argued and fought for the way he created in Geneva, he continued all his life to correspond and negotiate with Lutherans and the new Church of England to maintain the unity of the church.

I'm a Presbyterian because those ideas of John Calvin are still the central values of Presbyterianism.

Does it matter what church you belong to? Not really. This is one way—and a pretty good way after all—but it is not the only one.

What is important is the decision each of us makes about who we are and will be, for what and for whom we will live and die. Before there was a Presbyterian church or a Reformation or a Roman Catholic church—2,000 years ago, to be precise—a man I believe was the Son of God one time looked a good friend in the face and said, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

Long before there was a Presbyterian church or Catholic church, there was a tiny company of followers who decided together to be that man’s men and women, to figure out together how to follow him and be his body on earth, after he was gone, to be his church.

They knew they could not do it alone. To follow him they needed one another. I’m a churchman because I still believe that, believe they were right: Peter, James, John, Mary, and Martha. I can’t follow him alone. I need the church to receive my faith and commitment such as it is—and sometimes it isn’t much—and join it to your faith and commitment and the faith of 2.1 million other Presbyterians and the faith and commitment of hundreds of millions of others to heal and teach and work for justice and peace in the world in his name.

The call to do that, to decide to be his man or woman, to live for him, to sign up for the journey of discipleship, to stand with his people, is as compelling as it was 2,000 years ago.

In the middle of thinking about this sermon, I received word that a Presbyterian minister died, pastor of the Bethel Presbyterian Church in Kingston, Tennessee, one of the nearly 11,000 PC(USA) congregations in the country. His name is Marc Sherrod. He was fifty-one years old, and I know him because his brother Martin Sherrod—Marty— is a colleague on the staff of this church and a longtime member of this congregation.

When Marc died after a heroic battle with cancer, leaving a wife and four children, I looked up his church’s website and found the “Minister’s Welcome” along with a handsome picture of Mark in his Geneva robe.

I’m a Presbyterian because of what Marc said about Bethel Presbyterian Church—not because it was unique, but because it was so solid, so quintessentially Presbyterian.

Marc told where he studied, his academic degrees and academic interests. He explained that Bethel Church is one of nearly 11,000 Presbyterian churches with roots in the sixteenth-century Reformation. He explained that Bethel Presbyterian Church has been ordaining women for years and believes that its mission is not only to transform individual lives but also the structures and systems of society so that all, particularly the downtrodden

and oppressed, are cared for. He said that Bethel Church is happy to cooperate with other churches and to invests its money to feed the hungry, to visit prisoners in a nearby correctional facility, provide funds to help unemployed people with utility bills, and sponsor a Scout troop for fifty boys.

Marc concluded by saying that since every Sunday is a “little Easter,” celebrating the new life in the risen Christ, we bring to God the best we have in response to the abundance of all that has been given and done for us.

“Everything,” Marc said, “reflects our belief that we belong to God and that in Christ God has entrusted us with ministries of love, justice, reconciliation and compassion.”

I thanked God for Marc Sherrod—his life and ministry—and for the tradition, the Presbyterian tradition, that nurtured him and me.

I’m a Presbyterian because I love this tradition. It’s not the only one, but it’s a good one. I commend it to you.

Amen.